



W.D. Ehrhart

## **Against a Coming Extinction**

### **W.D. Ehrhart and the Evolving Canon of Vietnam Veterans' Poetry**

But you are where you belong,  
it is raining and cold,  
and what is a world or a life  
without principles?

—*"The Storm," W. D. Ehrhart*

#### **The poet who stands out in the cold**

Postmodern theory celebrates the fluidity and ideological freedom possible for writers on the margins or at the borders of the dominant culture. bell hooks, for instance, in "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness" describes a "revolutionary effort which seeks to create space where there is unlimited access to the pleasure and power of knowing, where transformation is possible" (145). Likewise, in "La consciencia de la mestiza: Towards a New Consciousness," Gloria Anzaldua describes a "struggle of borders" which results in "a new consciousness—a mestiza consciousness—and though it is a source of intense pain, its energy comes from a continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm" (379). "Borderland" writers like hooks and Anzaldua reject the role of victimized "other" in favor of hybrid pluralism and heteroglossia, but admit that the margin "is not a 'safe' place. One is always at risk. One needs a community of resistance" (hooks 149).

Though he is not marginalized by race, language, or gender, W.D. Ehrhart often positions himself as an outsider and a resister. This separateness stems partly from his experience as a trauma survivor, partly from oppositional political beliefs, and

partly from his marginal position in relation to an academically-centered poetry world. Unlike writers who find personal and political power in marginality, Ehrhart often voices anxiety about his position as an outsider; rather than speaking as part of "a community of resistance," he more often speaks as a lonely prophet whose very existence is "at risk." The poem from which the opening epigraph is taken might be read as an allegory for Ehrhart's opposition to callow American culture and his choice to follow a career track outside the boundaries of what Charles Bernstein calls "official verse culture." The speaker—distanced and objectified as "you"—waits alone at midnight on a cold, rainy train platform. When the train he thought he wanted finally comes, he chooses not to board; instead, he admits "the engineer, / the conductor, are wrong" and he holds his ground. The train not taken moves on without him, and though he comes to the realization that "you are where you belong," still "you" are left "standing alone, / heart filled with obscenities and black like the rain" (*Laughs* 75). There is a mixture of perverse pride as well as angry fatalism in the speaker's lonely choice to hold fast to his principles and to resist the authority and power of the conductor. Though this feels like the only possible stance for someone of Ehrhart's integrity, the poem registers the cost of this choice. The position of waiting alone—in the dark, in the rain, in the fog, in the snow, in the jungle, in the desert, on the train platform—is so recurrent in Ehrhart's poetry and prose that it marks one of his defining features. While more than the vicissitudes of literary reputation feed this isolation, Ehrhart's position as an outsider poet measuring the risks of obscurity must surely play a part. Ultimately, this anxiety is less about his current place in the literary landscape than about his fear of disappearing in the future.

Of course, whether you are inside or outside or in between depends on where you stand. Ehrhart is sometimes an insider—one who can speak of "us" when addressing fellow Vietnam veterans and "them" in relation to non-veterans, academics, or mainstream culture in general. Sometimes American culture is "we," and sometimes it is an indicted "you." And sometimes in his poetry, "I" stands separate from everyone. Not coincidentally, Ehrhart's standing in the evolving canon of Vietnam veterans' poetry is also highly ambiguous, even

paradoxical. Many people both "inside" and "outside" the academic world consider Ehrhart a canonized saint (Dan Duffy, an editor of *Vietnam Generation*, calls Ehrhart the journal's "spiritual leader"; Don Ringnalda has labeled him the "most important" veteran poet and "poet laureate of the war"). He is appreciated both for the force and variety of his writing and for his efforts to edit veterans' poetry and thus help sustain it as a defined and available body of writing. Yet as a poet, he is also an anomaly—the only "major" veteran poet to make his living outside the academy, where many of his readers and the peers he has promoted have comfortable careers. Though he publishes prolifically and has earned his share of literary prizes and teaching stints, his livelihood as a writer has been precarious and his visibility limited. Most of his poems appear in highly ephemeral small-press editions, and the few anthologies reprinting his poems (those he himself edited) give only a narrow sampling of his work. Despite his undisputed significance within the cottage industry of Vietnam War literature and among veteran activists, he has less currency outside these communities than poets with academic affiliations, such as John Balaban, Bruce Weigl, Walter McDonald, and Yusef Komunyakaa. All but invisible in the larger landscape of contemporary poetry, Ehrhart has little chance of surviving in the selected canon of works that eventually will come to signify "Vietnam veterans' poetry" unless the borders of this evolving canon are kept open.

My intent is to intervene in a process of canon formation that is already well underway in the field of Vietnam literary studies—a field, as N. Bradley Christie claims, that "is already shaping itself along lines established and perpetuated by familiar institutional practices" (1). Intervention is a hopeful act, Christie reminds us, since "as constructs of human thought, canons are never the same, always shifting shapes to accommodate equally protean contexts." In tracing Ehrhart's relationship to this canon-in-the-making, I would like to help guard against his outright disappearance as well as the more insidious warping of his work to fit a conservative cultural and critical status quo. As a poet only loosely affiliated with the "institutional practices" of the academic literary establishment, Ehrhart is shut out of canon-forming processes on three levels: social, aesthetic, and ideological. After exploring how these realms combine to

complicate Ehrhart's place in the canon, I would like to sketch some larger questions of canon formation in the field of Vietnam War poetry. I would further like to show that throughout his career, Ehrhart himself has considered these questions, showing self-awareness about his role as an outsider poet and weighing the trade-offs between holding to principles and standing alone on the platform.

Anxiety and even resignation about oblivion—conceived in one recent poem, “For a Coming Extinction,” as an almost Darwinian obsolescence—have haunted Ehrhart almost as much as the nightmare of the Vietnam War has. “Vietnam” here conflates personal memories and political history, both of which are in danger of disappearing when Ehrhart, the witness, disappears:

Vietnam. Not a day goes by  
 without that word on my lips.  
 I hear the rattle of small-arms fire  
 when I tuck my daughter in,  
 think of the stillborn dreams of other men  
 when I make love to my wife,  
 sharp snap of a flag in high wind—  
 blood, stars, an ocean of ignorance.  
 Sometimes I mumble the word to myself  
 like a bad dream, or a prayer:  
 Vietnam, Vietnam. Already  
 it's become what never was:  
 heroic, a noble cause. Opportunity  
 squandered, chance to learn turned  
 inside out by cheap politicians  
 and *China Beach*. So many so eager  
 so soon for others to die,  
 and the time's fast arriving  
 when Vietnam means only a distant  
 spot on the globe, only a name  
 on a dusty map, when no one alive  
 will understand what was or is,  
 what might have been and was lost. (*Distance* 33)

While the extinction imagined in this poem takes the outsider position as far as it will go—outside memory and recorded

history—the preoccupation with the future evident throughout Ehrhart's work is less a personal existential crisis than a cultural and literary one. He is permanently maddened by the probability that the particular history of Vietnam that has shaped, as he says, "virtually everything I see, do and think" is threatened with erasure in a "nation with no sense of history, no sense at all" (*Laughs*). Some poems even go so far as to suggest that our very survival as a species is threatened by our historical amnesia. It is not literary immortality Ehrhart dreams of, but a world made safer and more humane by the lessons, warnings, and principles carried in his poems and memoirs. Yet the survival of "Vietnam" as living, usable knowledge will depend largely on the vehicle of writing by witnesses. Though he might not frame this evolutionary drama as a crisis of survival in the literary canon, that is precisely what is at stake.

**"But you are where you belong"**

Where exactly does W.D. Ehrhart, the poet, place himself? Ehrhart has chosen to work outside the university writing workshop circuit, fully, if ruefully, aware that the dissemination and survival of poetry depends heavily on the machinery of academic literary culture. For all the theoretical talk of a diverse and decentered poetry world, the actual life of poetry is still regulated by academic institutions and practices which tend to recognize and reward insiders. The reproduction of "institutional practices" is especially evident in the creation of anthologies, which are powerful tools for shaping and fixing canons of poetry. As Ron Silliman writes, "The university provides the context in which many, and perhaps most poetry readers are first introduced to the writing of our time; it may even be . . . the context in which the majority of all poems in the U.S. are both written and read" (157). While "academics" are by no means a homogeneous group, and while "academic poetry" no longer makes sense as a category, still it is useful to notice that real boundaries do affect individual poets' careers and reputations.

Ehrhart sometimes seems resentful, sometimes resigned, and sometimes even proud of his independent standing. Even if the world of academia is one to which he doesn't aspire, it is one he can't ignore. He thus belies an edgy accommodation when he has

commerce with academics. When *Carrying the Darkness* was taken out of print after one edition by Avon Press (poetry doesn't sell), Ehrhart elicited the help of fellow poet Walter McDonald, who teaches at Texas Tech University, in persuading that university press to pick up the anthology. In his Introduction to *Unaccustomed Mercy: Soldier-Poets of the Vietnam War*, also published by Texas Tech, Ehrhart complains that he reluctantly returned to the task of editing because "it was not likely to be done at all (and certainly no time soon) if I didn't do it myself"—a condition he blames on "the failure of more objective and more scholarly people to acknowledge and deal with the vast body of poetry to which the Vietnam War has given rise" (1). Lest we miss the barb, John Clark Pratt, in his Preface to the same volume, likewise finds that the failure of Vietnam War poetry to find an "appreciative audience" is the fault of "academics—who seem to have trouble assigning or anthologizing poetry that something can't be 'said' about" (viii). (Pratt is not referring to linguistic indeterminacy, but to poetry so plainspoken that presumably it doesn't need elaborate explication.)

Several years later, however, Ehrhart characteristically plays go-between, speaking favorably about an interdisciplinary academic conference and urging his mostly non-academic veteran readers of the Vietnam Veterans of America newsletter to consider rapprochement with academics. He defends a necessary alliance in an imperfect system because "Neither Hollywood nor Madison Avenue nor Music Television is ever likely to teach them [students] the difference [between the last U.S. helicopter out of Saigon and Custer's last stand], and you and I aren't going to live forever, so if they're going to learn anything worth knowing about the war in Vietnam it will be people like the ones I met at Notre Dame who will teach them" (*Veteran* 22). As a poet with a primary interest in education, particularly in teaching things "worth knowing about the war in Vietnam," as one poem puts it, Ehrhart can hardly avoid the university altogether. Still, these comments suggest the kind of shuttle diplomacy he has sometimes had to resort to in straddling the world of grass-roots veteran and progressive activism (all those non-poetry readers!) and the world of academic poetry markets (all those student deferments!).

However personally painful or socially awkward it might be for Ehrhart to "hold" his "ground," the critical question is not

whether he has a satisfying career but whether his poetry reaches the audience it deserves and hence has an effect on how future generations understand the Vietnam War. While it is very risky to talk about the demographics of poetry production and reception, I would like to hazard a few observations, for the question of audience—both whom he is writing for and who is listening—is highly problematic and complicates Ehrhart's place in the canon. Ehrhart is not writing primarily to elite academic poetry readers, though he is happy if we listen in and even more happy if we write about and anthologize his poems. Yet most likely, these *are* (I am) his primary readers—those who use his anthologies in their classes and have the wherewithal to order his books from tiny presses. Ehrhart's direct, demotic, accessible style is geared toward a literate common reader, but Ehrhart won't show up on your neighborhood bookstore shelf, let alone in Barnes and Noble or Waldenbooks. Nor will professors outside the field of Vietnam studies generally run across Ehrhart on their own. He is not likely to be invited to present a presidential inaugural poem, to judge a major poetry contest, or even, perhaps, to spend a month at Yaddo or Breadloaf. Aware that he is often writing to an already converted choir, Ehrhart knows that the audience he most wants to reach—those citizens who are ignorant or apathetic about the Vietnam War and who probably don't consider themselves poetry readers—is the one least likely to encounter his poems. Writing not so much within an abyss as *into* an abyss, he risks writing for a reader who isn't listening. Moreover, his relation to this non-reader is often oppositional. Many poems gain their rhetorical force by lamenting that no one is listening and chiding the non-reading reader for not reading. While one might see this stance as almost perversely stubborn—parallel to shivering and cursing obscenities on the train platform—I think instead we should view it as courageous. Again, bell hooks provides an unexpected but useful intersection, for she reminds us that “Spaces can be real and imagined. Spaces can tell stories and unfold histories. Spaces can be interrupted, appropriated, and transformed through artistic and literary practice” (152).

In addition to the problems of social positioning and audience, Ehrhart's choice to write plain, didactic, politically explicit poems has contributed to his marginality. Unfortunately, Ehrhart

himself has occasionally fed into what Adrienne Rich calls “falsely framed choices” constructed by much American criticism: “ivory tower or barricades, intuition or documentary fact, the search for beauty or the search for justice” (*What Is Found There* 53). Clearly averse to the stereotype of poetry as an elite and effete art, he can still disparage his own work in a moment of doubt as “idealistic bombast.” And in a now-infamous and often-quoted outburst at a 1985 Asia Society Conference, he seems to draw sharp divisions between ivory tower and barricades, beauty and justice. Re-printed in Timothy Lomperis’ *Reading the Wind*, Ehrhart’s comments originally joined a long-standing debate about imagination and truth in Vietnam War literature. Unfortunately, however, this statement has often been de-contextualized and pinned to Ehrhart to signify aesthetic lapses or compromises: “I find it extremely difficult to sit here and talk about the Vietnam War as art. I don’t give a goddamn about art. I’m an educator, and my writing is a tool of education. I think I feel as strongly as Ron [Kovic] does that, if I cannot affect the course of my country as a result of my experiences, then whatever I do as a writer is an utter failure” (32). The statement leads Don Ringnald, for instance, to accept that “apparently Ehrhart doesn’t believe that art can be a powerful form of education” (145) before going on to demonstrate that Ehrhart is an artist in spite of his beliefs. It is more realistic, I think, to take this confession as a highly rhetorical indication of Ehrhart’s distrust of art purely for art’s sake and his deep commitment to writing which will reach the unconverted and bring about progressive social and political change. The evidence of his poems points toward his attempts to reconcile the dichotomies Rich describes. Ehrhart’s poetry shares the same wellspring Denise Levertov finds in the political poetry of Pablo Neruda; all four politically engaged poets, in fact, “demonstrate that there is no inherent contradiction between the spheres of poetry and [revolutionary] politics . . . indeed it is their basic interrelatedness that is inherent: a profound and generous passion for life, for all of earthlife, is the source of both” (*Cave* 135).

While it is misleading to claim, as Pratt does, that nothing “can be ‘said’ about” Ehrhart’s poetry, it is true that plain-spoken poetry generally elicits little interest among academic critics,

who make their living, after all, as theorizers and explainers and who find it easier to explicate dense poems than to account for the place of poetry in our political lives. Even more problematic than a demotic poetics, however, is a poetics of rage, which truly resists established modes of literary decorum. Tony Williams, writing in *Vietnam Generation*, warns that prevailing prejudices in academic criticism will greatly constrict the evolving canon of Vietnam literature:

Naturally alert to status quo threats within any growing movement, academia's conservative nature will examine this terrain [Vietnam War studies] seeking to recuperate any discourse for "balanced," historical, self-referential purposes. Thus, while certain works (Kovic, Ehrhart, Emerson) appear too dangerously implicated in unacceptable areas of emotional rage, historical relevance and realist structure, others appear ideal candidates for inclusion within certain non-referential discourses associated with deconstruction and postmodernism. (126)

Although Ehrhart does not always speak in an enraged voice, he has persistently written *about* his rage, and his reasons are always embedded in specific historical and material realities. Moreover, his anger and his trauma are unresolved, and the effect of their expression is to keep the reader from comfortably subsuming the Vietnam War into available cultural myths.

While it is not easy to live and write as an outsider, it is even more difficult, in a way, to resist the seductions and rewards of life within academic poetry circles. He may curse and berate himself for standing out in the storm, but Ehrhart, I would suggest, is a rare example of a poet who successfully resists absorption as other poetic radicals and renegades have not. The perpetual challenge of the avant-garde, of course, is to stay on the outside or in the vanguard in a culture that digests the radically new as quickly as it emerges. Outsiders from Ezra Pound to John Cage, from Virginia Hamilton Adair to Laurie Anderson, from the Beats to the Language Poets, from black revolutionaries to lesbian feminists have all found their way into academic canons, as charted by the discourses of the classroom, the anthology, the

literary journal, and the academic conference. Ehrhart's position is both more simple and more complicated than that of the so-called avant-garde, since he speaks not from a position of deconstructive aestheticism but from a middle register of common language. Likewise, as a middle-class, white, male poet, he has not benefited from the cachet attached to a subversive poetics of identity politics practiced by writers like hooks and Anzaldúa. It may even be that his very plainness and his very old-fashioned insistence on moral and political integrity—rather than any particular radical ideology—are what assure his non-absorbability into academic canons. Ironically, of course, maintaining his outsider status will eventually assure Ehrhart's extinction, and thus the disappearance of an important witness and source of knowledge about the war. Just as the Vietnam War itself as historical event has proven non-absorbable in American culture except as a popular commodity, a "noble cause," and a "syndrome" to be "kicked," Ehrhart's poetry is in danger of remaining outside the realm of sanctioned, canonical literature about the war. I would argue, however, that it is not Ehrhart's responsibility to board the train, but our job as readers and critics to lay new tracks.

**"What is a world or a life without Principles?"**

From the beginning of his writing career, Ehrhart has contemplated marginality as a theme. Often, of course, this position reflects Ehrhart's status as a veteran and his enraged opposition to a nation willing to be "fleeced, bamboozled, and hoodwinked by a government that is supposed to be of the people, by the people and for the people" (*Shadow* xii). Inevitably, this role of embattled outsider becomes enmeshed with his role as a poet—or, it may be, he became a poet in the first place in order to give creative and didactic expression to his rage. Ehrhart strives to establish an identity and fellowship outside the literary mainstream in several early poems. Newly returned from Vietnam and radicalized by the anti-war movement, he looks to poetic models who merge ethical principles, political activism, and linguistic honesty. In "Letter to a North Vietnamese soldier whose life crossed paths with mine in Hue City, February 5th, 1968," Ehrhart implores his former enemy to "Remember Ho

Chi Minh / was a poet: please: / do not let it all come down / to nothing" (*Tired* 35). "Matters of the Heart," dedicated to Leftist poet Thomas McGrath and James Cooney, "first American printer of Miller and Nin," articulates one of Ehrhart's most recurring dilemmas. Feeling like a lonely gadfly, he laments the futility of protest in an age when "Everyone's asleep, or much too busy," and asks "What am I supposed to do . . . Where do you get your strength?" The poem ends with a renewed vow that invokes a whole suppressed tradition of politically engaged poetry in the U.S.—an inheritance he most likely found on his own rather than in the classroom. The inspiration of the older poets' voices releases the paralyzed "stillness of excuses" and helps him continue to act in the face of futility. (It's a theme that permeates his work; in a 1990 speech / essay, he confesses "Nothing I do will make any difference, but to do nothing requires a kind of amnesia I have yet to discover a means of inducing" (*Shadow* 126). What good, after all, "is a world or a life / without principles," he decides, and the poem's final lines become his marching orders as a poet of witness and political conscience:

I'm tired of being swatted like a bothersome fly:  
pariah, voice in the wilderness. My friends  
look at me with pity in their eyes.  
I want to own a house, raise a family,  
draw a steady paycheck. What, after all, can I do  
to change the course of a whole mad world?  
I'm only a man; I want to forget for awhile  
and be happy . . .

. . . and yet your lives,  
your words, your breath, your beating  
old tired fighters' unbowed hearts  
boom through the stillness of excuses  
like a stuck clock forever tolling:

"Don't give in. Go on. Keep on.  
Resist. Keep on. Go on." (*Tired* 60)

Another early poem, "Money in the Bank," measures the cost of this commitment to a life in the cultural and literary

wilderness. Written after the fall of Saigon, when the Vietnam veteran was truly a pariah and a scapegoat, the poem reveals Ehrhart's early awareness of himself as an outsider poet and faces head-on the question of obscurity and loneliness. First positioning himself as one of "us"—a typical (academic) poetry reader who wouldn't have heard of nearly-homeless poet Alfred Starr Hamilton in school or in prestigious literary journals—he then shifts to an identification with Hamilton, imagining his own fate as a poet as well as a "future" and a canon in which many such writers will disappear. Ehrhart's complexity of tones here—part earnest gratitude, part fear, part admiration for Hamilton's uncompromising survival on the fringe, part defensive sarcasm, and large part self-irony—is one of his characteristic (and often overlooked) strengths as a poet:

Sixty-one years old,  
and I have never heard of you  
because you are not taught in school  
and your poems do not appear in *Poetry*  
and your only book was not reviewed  
because we have no use for poets  
who have no use  
for us.

Well, Mr. Hamilton,  
now I have heard of you;  
and tomorrow the mailman  
will give you this  
(along perhaps with another summons  
from the Garden State  
because they say you are a vagrant),  
and you'll open it and find  
some person that you do not know  
has sent you money.

I'd like to say I sent you this  
because I simply care  
about another human being.

But the truth is, Mr. Hamilton,  
this money you receive

is for myself,  
and for the future;

and I send it out of fear. (*Tired* 27-28)

Unlike Hamilton, however, Ehrhart very clearly *does* have use for us. Though he mentions a “future” in which his name might not appear, his deepest fear—one that provokes the urgent tone in so many of his poems—is that he won’t be heard now by those who are shaping our children’s future. Though most poets no doubt worry about obscurity, this fear is particularly acute for political poets dependent on an immediate dialogue with a real community of readers. Adrienne Rich, for instance, describes a similar anxiety: “In writing poetry, I have known both keen happiness and the worst fear—that the walls cannot be broken down, that these words will fail to enter another soul. Over the years, it has seemed to me just that—the desire to be heard, to resound in another’s soul—that is the impulse behind writing poems” (*Doorframe* xv). Though in the time since these poems were written Ehrhart has, in fact, avoided soup kitchens, bought a house, and started a family, the steady paycheck remains elusive and his fear of not being heard has not been allayed.

After these early attempts to define his place in literary history and culture, Ehrhart comes to a clear sense of his role as a poet-teacher with a moral and political mission to wake up a complacent, oblivious public. Fighting against and tracing the continuities between the silence surrounding the Vietnam War in the seventies, the blind capitulation to low-intensity warfare in Central America and massive weapons build-up during the eighties, and the gaudy display of patriotic gore in the Gulf War during the nineties, Ehrhart has had no shortage of material. Nor has he ever stopped being frustrated that his words are only reaching the choir. Yet, as “The Storm” suggests, he has no choice but to write from a place of conscience. Despite a rich tradition of political and prophetic jeremiad in American literature, American criticism treats didacticism in poetry like a disease, and this mission only serves to marginalize Ehrhart further.

Several of his most urgent and impassioned poems are didactic in the literal sense, spoken as a teacher to his students, to whom he feels accountable and whose future he worries about. “The Teacher,” written “for my students at Sandy Spring Friends

School; September, 1978," marks an important consolidation of Ehrhart's identity as a poet and teacher committed to a life of political activism. He asserts a strong conviction that his experience as a soldier and a pacifist qualifies him to pass on advice:

A dozen years ago,  
before I ever knew you,  
beneath a moon not unlike  
this moon tonight,  
I swore an oath to teach you  
all I know--  
and I know things  
worth knowing. (*Tired* 48)

When the poem pivots from past to "desperate future," however, Ehrhart sounds a more tentative note and echoes once again his fear of not being heard or understood. Interestingly, as in "Matters of the Heart," Ehrhart seeks connection with other voices in order to find his own; the "stuck clock forever tolling" in the earlier poem is here a frozen "clip-clapper tongue." (It is no accident, I think, that song is a redemptive, healing motif in Ehrhart's life and poetry; one poem describes his mother's off-key singing in church as an offering "for God and me / and all the angels sang along, / and what she heard was joy" (*Distance* 25); he married a "Woman with voice like a carillon / pealing the cold from my bones" (*Laughs* 33); and his daughter inherits this gift, "not knowing she is singing / for a father much in need / of her particular song" (*Laughs* 42). The poem ends irresolutely with a plea for reciprocity and a common language that remains, like Adrienne Rich's, only a dream:

It is a desperate future  
I cling to,  
and it is yours.  
All that I have lived for  
since that cold moon long ago  
hangs in the balance--  
and I keep fumbling for words,  
but this clip-clapper tongue  
won't do.

I am afraid;  
I do not want to fail:

I need your hearts to give me courage;  
I need you to talk with me in silence  
until I find a voice that speaks  
the language  
that you speak. (*Tired* 49)

Confidence often replaces doubt, however, when Ehrhart has a clear target for his rage. "A Warning to My Students," written three years later, teaches more assertively "things / worth knowing." The poem links Vietnam with the Reagan-era arms build-up and counter-insurgency in Central America and warns students against buying into the myths of glory and patriotism which once lured Ehrhart to war. The poem never explicitly mentions Vietnam—only his own recurring nightmares—but it does invoke 20/20 hindsight to imagine a different past:

If I were young again,  
I could do it all  
differently: go to college,  
go to Canada, live underground  
on the lam in basement apartments  
in strange cities—anything  
but kill  
somebody else's enemies  
for somebody else's reasons. (*Banks* 23)

As in the earlier poem, the focus then shifts from past experience to future prophecy—"And now I see it all / coming / one more time; one / by one, all the old flags / resurrected"—and ends with ominous warning, a tone Ehrhart has perfected:

. . . the next time they come looking  
for soldiers, they won't come looking  
for me. I'm too old;  
I know too much.

The next time they come looking  
for soldiers, they'll come looking  
for you. (*Banks* 24)

Ehrhart's need to be heard, understood, and answered—if nothing else with thoughtful reading—is expressed over and over in references and addresses to future generations. Many poems leave us dangling with questions and insist on our responsibility for living morally in the present and working actively to shape a future free of war. A poem which is often reprinted and discussed, “To Those Who Have Gone Home Tired,” is characteristic in its direct appeal to the reader and its unabashedly accusatory questions:

What answers will you find  
What armor will protect you  
When your children ask you

Why? (*Tired* 29)

The antecedent for these questions is actually a long series of apocalyptic predictions based on a series of clauses beginning with “After”—“After the streets fall silent . . . After the last iron door clangs shut / behind the last conscience . . .” In his fine reading of the poem, Don Ringnalda points out that what Ehrhart “sees is that Vietnam was a domino in an ongoing policy of extermination, exploitation, and greed.” The poem asks us “to match Kent State, My Lai, and Hiroshima with sweaters made in Taiwan, the last Indian dying at Pine Ridge, extinct whales, and so on.” The nightmare of American history leads inexorably to a nightmare future, and “The grammar of ‘Gone Home Tired’ reinforces the inertia of America’s real domino history, an unstoppable blizzard of violent events leading to Vietnam, hooked together tail to mouth” (148-49). While Ehrhart might well have made this political argument in prose, the poem’s grammatical tension, concision, and direct implication of the reader as “you” are far more persuasive.

“Letter to the Survivors” reads as a suicide note left for “Those Who Have Gone Home Tired” or for their questioning children, a lame excuse rather than a morally convincing explanation to the “why” of the earlier poem. A true jeremiad written during the era of unprecedented military bloat, the poem’s searing irony both predicts a bleak future and indicts those in the present who ignore the course of their own self-destruction; its rhetoric

recalls the rationalizations that ordinary Germans were ignorant or “just following orders” during the Holocaust:

To any who find this,  
understand:

year by year, we could see it  
approaching—the tensions  
mounting, the missiles  
mounting, the bombers  
rising, . . .  
We knew it,  
but we were afraid.  
We were ordinary people, only  
the work-a-day Marys and Joes.  
Our leaders insisted  
they were striving for peace.  
What could we do  
but believe them?  
We had only our one vote each,  
only our small voices;  
and it was a crime to refuse  
to serve, and a crime  
to refuse to pay.  
We did not want to lose our friends;  
we did not want to lose our jobs;  
we did not want to lose our homes—

and we didn't really believe  
it could happen. (*Tired* 70)

Again, Ehrhart's use of repetition and his deployment of pronouns are extremely effective, both politically and poetically. As “you” pointed directly at the reader in the previous poem, “we” now implicates us in responsibility for the future and refuses, as Ringnalda puts it, to “let America off the hook.” The imperative to “Understand” grabs us by the collar and his choice not to define “it” gives the poem sinister power.

When Ehrhart's fears about the future reach their most passionate pitch, he resorts to more concrete images of apocalyptic terror. “Surviving the Bomb One More Day” takes off

from a real deep freeze and thaw to wonder whether the world will end in fire or ice: "Is this how we would finally end? / Not in fire; not consumed in mushroom orange heat, / but laid out stiff and hard / like fish in a peddler's cart?" Most tormenting is the "waiting in the eerie fog of half-awake / for the final slap of the blast . . . another night / of waiting for the fire" (*Outer Banks* 27). Of all the natural symbols in Ehrhart's poetry, snow carries the most terrifying sense of obliteration, suggesting a universe utterly oblivious to humankind. In "the Blizzard of Sixty-Six," a white-out imagistically connects Vietnam and America; the blizzard—of real snow, of lead bullets, of dead bodies—"fell and fell on the green rice, / on gray buffalo, thatched huts, green / patrols, and the mounting yellow dead" finally obliterates even history and memory: "Presidents / come and go away like snowdrifts / in driveways; generals come and go; / the earth goes on silently turning / and turning through its seasons, / and the snow keeps falling" (*Outer Banks* 36). Behind these turns is the slight trace of Yeats' millennial "widening gyre." Ehrhart, of course, is not the first or only writer to leap directly from Vietnam to apocalypse, but he is a primary contributor to this trope.

Luckily, Ehrhart informs us in his essay, "Stealing Hubcaps," "I do have good days, too" (*Shadow* 126) when he is able to let go of both the terror of the past and the terror of the future and fully inhabit the present moment—even if only for a moment. Though many poems work free of stasis, the future is never quite safe. In the vividly lyrical "The Vision," "it" is a blessed gift of life rather than apocalyptic annihilation, and "It can happen anywhere: / on a bus, on the street, / . . . over a beer; / in the arms of the person you love." When "it" happens, anything seems possible,

and the heart leaps up  
like the first glimpse of the cloudless  
moonless night sky above New Mexico,  
and you suddenly stare  
into the infinite power  
of how things could be  
if the dreams you live on  
came true.

In the context of other poems of nuclear dread in Ehrhart's

work, however, we might be justified in reading a slight hint of irony or impending disaster in his choice to set the vision in New Mexico—land of nuclear test sites and poisoned Indian ancestral territory. We have to turn the page to get the last stanza, which falls from Wordsworthian heart leaping up to Wordsworthian lost vision and which packs double meaning into its imagery of exploding light to suggest both visionary epiphany and nuclear blast:

Only a flash,  
a single terrible instant,  
lifting and swift as lightning,  
an explosion of joy—  
and then it is gone,  
and only the vision remains.

and the longing. (*Banks* 39-40)

**“What shall we give our children?”**

In poems published in the nineties, Ehrhart has become a seasoned teacher and an emissary of peace. He has returned twice to Vietnam as a poet-educator rather than a warrior. The poems arising from these trips form an important cluster within Ehrhart’s opus and are among his most lyrically beautiful, and several, such as “Sleeping with General Chi” and “the Distance We Travel,” are among his finest poems. Returning to Vietnam brings grief and painful memory, but also many opportunities for making personal amends, finding reconciliation, reaffirming camaraderie with fellow veterans, and appreciating the resilience of the Vietnamese people and landscape. Back home, however, Ehrhart is more haunted and angry than ever, oppressed by “the plodding sameness / of cruelty, a circular world / impervious to change, / the grinding erosion of hope / stripping the soul” (*Laughs* 38). At his darkest moments, what he advises is “A kind of blindness, that’s what’s needed now”—a line which sounds like a gong in its repetition within a villanelle, “The Way Light Bends.” Often, he is still paralyzed with despair and waiting: “We turn on the radio, gaze / up at the sky, and wait” (*Laughs*); “Just

now, I'm watching snow / collecting in the upper branches, / waiting for the robins to come home" (*Laughs* 57).

Offsetting darkness and apocalypse in Ehrhart's recent work, however, is a very noticeable trust in "art as a tool of education." Though he is still passionately didactic in many poems, he seems more resigned to being unheard by those who most need his messages. His last three books—*Just for Laughs* (1990), *The Distance We Travel* (1993), and a long-poem chapbook, *Mostly Nothing Happens* (1996) represent the work of a poet in the prime of his career—what Owen, Sassoon, and Rosenberg might have sounded like had they lived to remember their war in middle age. They are, moreover, palpably beautiful small press productions, which I take as a sign that Ehrhart does, indeed, "give a goddamn about art" and the aesthetic life of poetry. (*Just for Laughs* was published as an imprint of *Vietnam Generation* and has a striking painting by editor Kali Tal on its cover; the latest two books are handset and handsewn by Gary Metras, Ehrhart's publisher at Adastra Press.) As Vince Gotera shows in his discussion of *Just for Laughs*, Ehrhart has firm control of his craft and takes greater risks with form, language, and subject matter. Though these books may not find an audience beyond his current coterie following and though Ehrhart still voices fear that his message won't be heard, earlier expressions of self-doubt and skepticism about his calling are replaced here by confidence that "good poems / offer us the world with eyes renewed" (*Laughs* 53).

Lest he appear too much of an aesthete, however, Ehrhart serves up several poems affirming a muscular, masculine poetics, almost as if asserting his place in the poetry world by force. In "The Poet as Athlete" (*Laughs* 52-3), Ehrhart sees beneath the "gargantuan, Brobdingnagian, humongous" body of an overweight poet a "swimmer . . . all discipline, all muscle, lean and hard." The vehicle for this transformation, not surprisingly, is "a sure voice steady as the tides" which "draws us to the heart / of what we share" (*Laughs* 52). Two other poems about poetry keep the hard muscle, but cut out the soft heart, articulating a deliberately exaggerated, rhetorical *ars poetica* that is tough, clear, and brutal. In "The Heart of the Poem," he advises: "let your fingers dig until the heart / seats firmly in your palm / like a baseball or a grapefruit, / then jerk it out.// Get rid of it. /

Sentiment's for suckers. / Give us poetry" (*Laughs* 58). In "The Trouble with Poets," he gets to practice what he preaches. The colloquial, tough-guy persona narrates an incident where, thanks to "hard times in Poetryville," he wasn't paid fully for a reading in "a bar in South Philly":

I was just about to go away angry  
when a guy at the bar called me over.  
"Hey, listen, Mac," he said, "People get  
messed with and short-changed and fucked over,  
glad-handed, back-handed, brass-knuckled,  
bludgeoned, bullied, beat up and knocked down  
day in and day out all over the world.  
That's life, Mac. That's the trouble  
with poets: you guys refuse  
to accept it." (*Distance* 16)

The joke, of course, is that this poet who has spent much of his writing career with his heart inside out witnessing the ravages of war and mindless suffering *does*—through the very act of writing poems—"refuse / to accept it." He may be humbled by the guy at the bar's words, but he clearly will remain a poet with ideals, however "beat up."

Less humorously, this tough aesthetic drives a three-page prose poem/diatribe, "What War Does," a quintessential outsider poem. Ehrhart's barely suppressed scream at "a continent asleep, / drunk with martial glory and an empire's pride" finally erupts into vituperative fury. The whole dark weight of his past spews forth as Ehrhart attacks one more time the "willful ignorance," bourgeois protective armor, and amnesia of the American public: "And you wonder what is wrong with me. You might instead do well to marvel at the generosity of spirit that compels me to refrain from grabbing you by the scruff of your neck and pushing your face into the cesspool of sorrow and misery for which your gentle lives and two cars and four telephones are in no small measure responsible. What you don't know is evil." It is, finally, the horror Ehrhart has witnessed and survived that distances him from the genteel and complacent public. In the logic of the poem, those who are oblivious to "what war does" can't really believe their ignorance is evil, for "If you did, it would make your

life untenable. You would never again be able to let those you love out of your sight, even for a moment, without a fear so deep and stark it leaves you paralyzed, as if you could actually see the bullets violating their bodies, sending them sprawling like wounded dogs, their skulls smashed open, their brains leaking into the ground." Such flashbacks, like transparencies of the war laid on the present in other poems by Ehrhart, are precisely what color his vision—"forced to look and look and look till what you are seeing is burned into your retinas, until it is tattooed on your soul. And what you are seeing is the bottom line, the cold butchery upon which civilization is built." The "heart filled with obscenities and black like the rain" that was turned inward in "The Storm" here spits obscene threats that he claims he would only fulfill "If I thought it would help" (*Distance* 40-41).

With the exception of the hyperbolic rage of "What War Does," however, Ehrhart's earlier panic about the future is now more temperate, philosophically resigned, almost cosmic in perspective. His tone is often dry and matter of fact, as when he views oblivion as one of "The Facts of Life": "the earth is flat, you reach the edge, / fall off, and don't come back" (*Laughs* 45). In one poem, stars signify transcendent love: "each of us needs little stars / to lift our dreams beyond ourselves, / and I was hers, and you were mine" (*Distance* 26). But another, "After the Latest Victory," plunges into a full imagination of "a coming extinction." This poem is similar to earlier ones like "To Those Who Have Gone Home Tired" which link American history, political apathy, nature's indifference, and an apocalyptic future. Here, however, the rendering of history and emotion is more full and the language more suggestive than in earlier poems. The poem's emotions are more controlled and modulated by five-line, roughly iambic pentameter stanzas and woven together with the music of internal rhyme, signifying that Ehrhart has become more comfortable relying on the resources of his art rather than imperative statement and question. The banality of evil and the inevitability of war are now such facts of life for Ehrhart that he doesn't even name the current "victory"—the war in Iraq—or his own war. All he can do is lament the failure of American "hope and expectation" and witness "what we have made of it." The poem ranges brilliantly from sublimely tragic "cries from Planet Earth" to the historical tragedy of an American "continent still

asleep” and finally to the local tragedy of a rape by a boy  
hungering for Reeboks in Philadelphia. At the emotional core of  
the poem is deep, cosmic loneliness unrelieved by any answering  
call in the universe:

I call the sea. The wind calls back.  
No seagulls cries, no sailors' ghosts,  
not mermaids, God, nor any human voice  
disturbs the silence closing hard behind  
the last reverberations of that solitary cry.

Does sound just die? Or does the universe  
reverberate with cries from Planet Earth?  
Novenas, speeches, shouts, whole supplications  
striking Jupiter, careening off the stars  
like frozen screams or unsaid thoughts?

Only the wind, and the waves' dull roar,  
the dune grass dancing for the moon.  
Behind me lies a continent asleep,  
drunk with martial glory and an empire's pride,  
though each is transient as sand.

This continent was called the New Jerusalem.  
so much hope and expectation carried  
in the hearts of men and women brave  
enough to hazard all in search of this.  
Look what we have made of it.

In Fairmount Park, a girl is raped.  
Her father is a soldier in the Middle East.  
Her brother cannot read or write.  
The rapist wants a pair of sneakers  
like the ones he's seen in Reebok ads.

The moon's wide river rides the swells  
from breakers to the dark horizon.  
Above me, like a dignified procession,

the stars turn slowly through the night,  
indifferent to our helplessness. (*Distance* 34-35)

Perhaps it is natural that for this preacher's son, questions of moral and political despair should ultimately lead to questions of religious and metaphysical meaning.

### What might have been and was lost?

Though he would never put it in such clunky, academic terms, Ehrhart's fear of oblivion is, finally, tied to the question of canon formation, which in turn is inseparable from the forces which act in the culture at large to repress and distort our memory of Vietnam. Cary Nelson has shown in his study of thirties Leftist poetry, *Repression and Recovery*, that it takes less than a generation for whole traditions of writing to disappear, with the dire consequence that "What and who we are now is already in part a result of what we no longer know we have forgotten" (3)—a line which rings perilously true for our own culture's amnesia about the Vietnam war. "For a Coming Extinction," quoted at the beginning of this essay, nearly echoes Nelson's phrase and joins other poems connecting "willful ignorance" in the present and "extinction" in the future. In the poem, the Vietnam War is an endangered species—or, more accurately, a mutation bearing no resemblance to the real thing—for "already / it's become what never was." Ehrhart finally imagines with fatalistic certainty the historical oblivion he's been prophesying for years, "when no one alive / will understand what was or is, / what might have been and was lost."

One could argue that the extreme constriction of the canon is a fact of life in American poetry, and indeed, this is true. However, this condition still demands serious intervention and resistance. As Ron Silliman points out, "We are all diminished by the muting or loss of any voice . . . poetry itself is impoverished whenever and wherever its rich and diverse roots atrophy . . . our society discards enormous quantities of that which it could benefit from, and this includes poetry. The shelf life of a good poet may be something less than the half-life of a styrofoam cup" (150). The parallel between Ehrhart's work and the thirties

political poets Cary Nelson recovers is apt. As a poet of unmitigated rage and forthright political principles, Ehrhart is in an equally precarious position. His plain-spoken, oppositional, political poems often resist the techniques and elude the categories of traditional academic criticism. Writing on the margins of academic literary culture, Ehrhart risks being shut out by normative critical evaluations and canon-shaping assumptions, as well.

If we take the anthology as a formalization of the canon-selecting process, then Ehrhart's poetry is, indeed, in danger of extinction. My informal survey of sixteen trade and teaching anthologies of contemporary poetry reveals that Ehrhart appears in none of them. The few that do include poems by identified Vietnam veterans most often reprint Yusef Komunyakaa, John Balaban, Walter McDonald, and Bruce Weigl; unlike Ehrhart, all have several books with prestigious poetry and university presses and would thus be more accessible to editors. Even Carolyn Forché's voluminous collection, *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness*, omits Ehrhart, whether for literary reasons or because his work is less available than that of McDonald, Balaban, Komunyakaa, Weigl, George Evans, and James Fenton, who comprise the Vietnam selections. This is not to disparage the achievements of university-based poets or the heroic work of small presses faithful to poets like Ehrhart, nor do I mean to suggest such exclusions are deliberate or malicious. Rather, they suggest the complicated dynamics affecting the shelf life of poetry in the U.S.

In addition to the problem of visibility, serious analytical treatments of Ehrhart's poetry, as opposed to adulation for his work as an advocate for veterans' writing, are rare. Many critics seem unconsciously to reproduce the dichotomies Adrienne Rich identified, placing Ehrhart on the side of barricades, documentary fact, and justice rather than intuition and beauty. Very few challenge the dichotomies themselves. Even critics working within this field elevate Ehrhart the cultural-worker to a place of honor but finally relegate Ehrhart the poet to second rank. They often cushion their literary judgments and faint praise with glowing recognition of his work as an editor, as in this footnote in Philip Beidler's *Re-Writing America: Vietnam Authors in Their Generation*:

Ehrhart's career as a Vietnam author in his generation will always be of singular significance also in ways for which conventional criticism will never provide an adequate account. Specifically, one must note his championing of a "Vietnam" literature itself when there was virtually no one, so it seemed, in the United States who possibly cared to read it or hear about it. Likewise, one must acknowledge his ongoing support of fellow Vietnam writers . . . In sum, amidst the remarkable achievements of writing after our war, Ehrhart continues to deserve recognition, perhaps more than any other, as the Vietnam author in his generation who in fact made the idea of such a thing possible in the first place. (n. 310)

Though Ehrhart certainly deserves this praise, Beidler does nothing to correct or challenge the inadequacies of "conventional criticism," for his ensuing discussion of the poetry demonstrates how thoroughly literary canons are shaped by academic norms. Having paid due respect to Ehrhart's "wide-ranging experiments . . . as poet, critic, cultural essayist, memoirist, novelist, samizdat publisher, veterans' activist," Beidler seems not to have much to say about the poetry itself. He devotes a scant and superficial five pages to Ehrhart—and those to poems which have been discussed before—compared with eleven pages to John Balaban, nine pages to David Huddle, twelve pages to Yusef Komunyakaa, eight pages to Walter McDonald, and fourteen pages to Bruce Weigl. Such numbers in themselves prove nothing, but they do indicate implicit hierarchy (to say nothing of the more glaring delimitation of a canon and exclusion of many other good poets, including others writing outside the academic circuit like D.F. Brown, Marilyn McMahon, Bill Shields, and Lamont Steptoe). Beidler softens what I've elsewhere called Ehrhart's "consciously polemic" intent into an "appeal to mythic self-reconsideration" (159) and a "trick . . . of imaginative reconstitution" (162), thus portraying a less political poet than the Ehrhart who has spent his career deflating the myths surrounding the Vietnam War. Even more fundamentally, one wonders how a "conventional" critic like Beidler can claim, in this 1991 book, that Ehrhart "most recently [celebrated] a poetic

culmination in the emergence of *To Those Who Have Gone Home Tired*, a 1984 collection of poems written between 1970 and 1980, while ignoring a decade's worth of subsequent small press volumes: *The Outer Banks and Other Poems* (1984), *Winter Bells* (1988), and *Just for Laughs* (1990). Through such elisions and exclusions canons are closed, poems and voices lost, for a prominent book like Beidler's (his second major survey of the literature of the Vietnam War) is a powerful vehicle for introducing, judging, and disseminating this body of writing.

Fortunately, a more balanced and thorough treatment is provided in the first book-length study of veterans' poetry, Vince Gotera's *Radical Visions: Poetry by Vietnam Veterans*, a fine example of "conventional criticism" which does, in fact, account for Ehrhart's "substantial achievement" as a poet and resist Rich's "falsely-framed dichotomies." In his recognition that Ehrhart's work has evolved *artistically*, and in his close reading of poems demonstrating this evolution, Gotera's book contradicts Beidler's somewhat contorted evasion of Ehrhart's poetry. In his final assessment of Ehrhart as "an untiring, ever vigilant voice of conscience" (280); however, Gotera's praise is finally qualified by his fuller treatment of Weigl and Komunyakaa as superior poets whose work balances "personal catharsis and poetic aesthetics without compromising the realities of the Vietnam war" (xiii). Donald Ringnalda's incisive discussion of the strengths and shortcomings of Ehrhart's work take this assessment a step further by showing how conscience translates into aesthetic effectiveness in Ehrhart's "best poems." These are poems, says Ringnalda, that rise above "tell-it-like-it-is" reportage and insist on connections between Vietnam and the larger patterns of American history. They are poems in which Ehrhart "boldly and self-consciously attacks the 'truths' of his time and his gut" (145-46).

Ehrhart long ago gave up the illusion that poetry could change the world of realpolitik and faced the reality that "What I want for my daughter / she shall never have: / a world without war, a life / untouched by bigotry or hate, / a mind free to carry a thought / up to the light of pure possibility" (*Laughs* 38). Yet he keeps writing, despite the odds and despite his loneliness as an outsider, clearly holding on to the belief that poetry can "resound in another's soul" and thus have an effect on consciousness and conscience. Though never sanguine, Ehrhart is, finally, a poet of

hope, for he reminds us that we have choices that affect our collective future. Indeed, his achievement of rare moments of hope and his assessment of our choices are deepened by his sense of Darwinian doom. He states this choice beautifully in the last stanza of "Unaccustomed Mercies," dedicated to Larry Heinemann, whose *Paco's Story* is a novel paradoxically offering both apocalyptic obliteration and the survival of ghostlier demarcations: "what shall we give our children? / Paco's company blown to jungle junk / by our own obsessions—or a graceless kiss, / my weaponless hands, your smile" (*Laughs* 84).

We who play some small part in shaping a canon in this field have other choices as well: what we read and teach, whose poems we pass on to our children and students, which versions of history we write and believe. Clearly the muting and disappearance of W.D. Ehrhart's voice from the canon of Vietnam War literature would diminish our understanding of the war. But the loss would be deeper than this, for in measuring the costs of the Vietnam war, he sounds dire warnings and articulates moral and political choices which we seem eager to ignore as we rush into a new century. Ehrhart has taken his own stand against "a world or a life / without principles." It may even be that he has found greater artistic and ideological freedom as an outsider. But as readers and teachers, we need not preserve such invidious distinctions as insider/outsider, "ivory tower or barricades." We owe it to Ehrhart and to the vitality of poetry in general to work against his extinction and make sure his voice is widely heard. □

### Works Cited

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. "La consciencia de la mestiza: "Towards a New Consciousness."  
In Gloria Anzaldúa, ed. *Making Face Making Soul: Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Women of Color*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Foundation Books, 1990.
- Beidler, Philip D. *Rewriting America: Vietnam Authors in Their Generation*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1991.
- Bernstein, Charles. "What's Art got to do with it? The Status of the Subject of the Humanities in the Age of Cultural Studies." *American Literary History* 5:4 (Winter 93).

- Christie, N. Bradley. "The Shapes of Things: Canonicity and Writing About Vietnam." Unpublished paper presented at the conference, "The United States and Viet Nam: From War to Peace," University of Notre Dame, December 4, 1993.
- Ehrhart, W.D. and Jan Barry, eds. *Demilitarized Zones*. Perkasio, PA: East River Anthology, 1976.
- Ehrhart, W.D., ed. *Carrying the Darkness*. Lubbock: Texas Tech UP, 1989.
- . *The Distance We Travel*. Easthampton, MA: Adastra P, 1993.
- . *In the Shadow of Vietnam: Essays. 1977-1991*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1991.
- . *Just For Laughs*. Silver Spring, MD: *Vietnam Generation* 2:4, and Burning Cities P, 1990.
- . "Teach Our Children Well." *VVA Veteran* 14:2 (Feb 94).
- . *The Outer Banks and Other Poems*. Easthampton, MA: Adastra P, 1984.
- . *To Those Who Have Gone Home Tired*. NY: Thunder's Mouth P, 1984.
- .ed. *Unaccustomed Mercy*. Lubbock: Texas Tech University P, 1989.
- Gotera, Vince. *Radical Visions: Poetry by Vietnam Veterans*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1993.
- hooks, bell. "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness." *In Yearning: race, gender and cultural politics*. Boston: South End P, 1990.
- Levertov, Denise. "Revolution and Poetry: Neruda is Dead/Neruda Lives." *Light Up the Cave*. NY: New Directions, 1981.
- Lomperis, Timothy. "*Reading the Wind*": *The Literature of the Vietnam War*. Durham: Duke UP, 1987.
- Rich, Adrienne. *The Fact of a Doorframe*. NY: Norton, 1984.
- . "the Muralist," in *What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics*. NY: Norton, 1993.

Ringnalda, Donald. *Fighting and Writing the Vietnam War*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1994.

Rottmann, Larry, Jan Barry, and Basil Paquet, eds. *Winning Hearts and Minds*. Brooklyn: 1st Casualty P, 1972.

Silliman, Ron. "Canons and Institutions: New Hope for the Disappeared." In Charles Bernstein, ed. *The Politics of Poetic Form*. NY: Roof Books, 1990.

Williams, Tony. "Viet Nam War Studies: A Cultural Materialist Approach." *Vietnam Generation* 4:34 (Summer/Fall, 1992):126-32.

---

Lorrie Smith teaches American Literature and chairs the Department of English at St. Michael's College in Vermont. She writes about contemporary poetry and literature of the Vietnam War.



W.D. Ehrhart  
1967, Operation Pike, near Da Nang.